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MAGAZINE FOR CEBU PACIFIC • OCTOBER 2018

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THIS PAGE (LEFT TO RIGHT) PAUL SMITH TOP & H&M EARRINGS; PAUL SMITH TOP
FACING PAGE (LEFT TO RIGHT) PAUL SMITH DRESS; H&M SWEATER

THE GOOD PARTS

Manila's dining scene has a newfound confidence, built on an innovative flair among chefs, restaurateurs and bartenders.

It's time to take a bite of the action

BY **NINA UNLAY**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **LUCKY LEOPARTE**





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We hear it coming. It begins with drumbeats, rising in tempo; with a balet tree in the background, branches heavy with sprawling vines, a man ceremoniously pours liquid into a metal cup. He's flanked on either side by two others beating on small drums. All three of them are masked with the face of the sun. It's all very *Game of Thrones* up to this point. They end the "ritual" with a shout and, with a flourish, whip out what everyone's been waiting for: a cocktail.

It's a lot of drama for a drink, but this is the state of things in Metro Manila's restaurant and bar scene: playful, theatrical and a tad extra. "And after one ritual, everyone wants to order another one!" says the bartender at Agimat, one of the newest establishments to set up shop in Poblacion in Makati City.

Confident — that's the other thing. Opened officially at the end of August, Agimat Foraging Bar & Restaurant — by the same group behind Poblacion landmark Alamat — is a symbol of the



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food scene's mounting confidence. Bars and restaurants with sharper and tighter concepts have opened one after the other, usually along the same street. Poblacion, for instance, where this brisk development is most pronounced, has become a tourist site even for Manileños, not necessarily for its history or heritage, but for its evolving personality.

Soon after the ritual, a waiter comes by with snacks: rice stalks dehydrated





1 Neon-lit Makati **2** An Agimat bartender does his thing **3** Agimat's ingredients **4** Good talk and great drinks are guaranteed in Manila's bar scene

Meet the global locals

CHERYL TIU

The firebrand behind **Cross Cultures** (fb.com/crossculturesbycheryltiu), a platform that helps both local and international chefs and restaurants showcase different cuisines, is a tireless advocate for Filipino food on the world stage. Just last September, Roel Alcudia of Mandolin Aegean Bistro served up his take on La Paz *batchoy* (noodle soup with pork offal) — based on his hometown of La Paz in Iloilo City — in Miami.

MARGARITA FORÉS

Asia's Best Female Chef of 2016 recently launched **Islas Pinas** (fb.com/islaspinasbymargaritafores) in DoubleDragon Plaza, Pasay City, a dining hall that features food from different regions on its menu and encompasses different dining experiences, from freshly baked bread at the panaderya to snacking on *kwek-kwek*, or battered quail eggs, on the street. **Islas Pinas** also functions as a museum, featuring different aspects of Philippine culture in its design and paying tribute to historical sites like Intramuros.



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for several hours then cooked in an oven, puffed rice still attached to the stems so that you can nibble on them straight off the stalk. It's Rice Krispies meets popcorn, with a salty and smoky flavor instead of sweet — a strange combination that is both foreign and familiar.

Conceptually, Agimat's food menu, by chef Niño Laus, doesn't veer too far away from home, offering rather straightforward appetizers and mains, not necessarily Filipino in recipe. But always, the produce is either locally sourced or foraged in cooperation with partners in different provinces. Dishes are named after the star ingredients: *Kambing* (goat braised in *tapuy*, or rice wine, from the northern highlands and Davao cacao), *Manok* (chicken with roasted dalandan, micro vegetables, Ilocos black garlic and Vigan *longganisa* sausages) and *Saba* (bananas with *kalingag* or Mindanao cinnamon, ricotta, toffee and Batangas wild honey).

Behind the bar, there is row after row of colorful spirits and syrups — *lambanog* (coconut wine) and other products from local distillers — some made from what they have foraged.

"It takes a certain craziness to pull off this concept," admits Kalel Demetrio, one of Agimat's

"We can grow almost anything in the Philippines. It might not be the sweetest fruit, but we can grow it"

founding partners. Kalel is in charge of the drinks menu and calls his crew modern *alburayos*, after the traditional folk healers who mix mysterious, medicinal brews from local herbs. "We can grow almost anything in the Philippines. It might

not be the sweetest strawberry, but we can grow it. We have lowlands, highlands; we have the second-longest coastal area in Southeast Asia, after Indonesia. Why not use these ingredients we find here at the restaurant? Especially when we know what they can do."

It's only appropriate that this kind of swagger in the food scene is happening along the hardy streets of Poblacion, a former red-light district that's still littered with nightclubs and dodgier spots. Today, it's a frontier town for a daring new breed of establishments with well-defined concepts, from Agimat to Wantusawa (where fresh oysters flown in from Aklan are ₱50 a pop) and Oto (which serves some of the Philippines' finest craft cocktails). What used to be the business district's seedy underbelly is now the Manic Pixie Dream Girl of culinary hideaways:



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5 After Agimat's fresh theatrics, there's still much to admire in the presentation

6 Raw ingredients go on top of Agimat's creative concoctions 7 Bottoms up!



6



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full of personality, bright lights and the promise of something great and unexpected.

All this is a far cry from the interpretation of Filipino cuisine that tries to be reminiscent of your lola's cooking; the more conventional, homey aesthetic in the background meant to serve up overflowing nostalgia. Something has shifted in the past few years, as though the burden to be virtuously Pinoy has been lifted. It's made room for concepts with flair, like Agimat, where the interiors are moody-industrial, the colors almost neon-bright and the menus read nothing like family cookbooks. Yet, they stake claims on the word "Filipino", and in many ways, evoke the ways of old, innovative Filipino cooking.

"Chefs getting playful with a cuisine is usually a good sign," says food sociologist Clinton Palanca, whose book *The Gullet: Dispatches on Philippine Food* tracks the modern transformation of Manila from "gastronomic backwater into a giddy, opulent and at times overwhelming" destination for foodies. "It means the cuisine already has a distinctive identity; it means we understand who we are. It also means that there is an affluent middle and upper class who are interested in this cuisine being pushed to its boundaries."

The playful side of cooking might be at its flashiest in Poblacion, but the idea has been making waves throughout the rest of Metro Manila for quite some time. With considerations. The more straightforward restaurateurs — such



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as the Moment Group, founded by Abba Napa together with partners Eliza Antonino and Jon Syjuco, that owns restaurants such as the Test Kitchen and Mecha Uma — say that while customers are becoming more and more adventurous in their dining experiences, nostalgia is, still, a tough selling point to beat.

Among the Moment Group's more popular ventures is Manam, which opened five years ago in buzzy Bonifacio Global City, Manila's new, modern face. Manam offers a bright dining experience with interiors that highlight the meeting between homey and modern: large house plants, off-white walls and plenty of light. The same thoughtful consideration



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The bar review

Exciting night spots in the metro, from Poblacion to BGC

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Right above ABKD restaurant in Poblacion, this bar features the most local of local ingredients in its house cocktails: calamansi and Red Horse beer. fb.com/abkd.ph

THE WORKSHOP

The leather shop storefront belies delicious serves of their signature gin *buko*, made with Ginebra gin and fresh coconut juice to balance it out. fb.com/theworkshopmnl

DR WINE

Dr Wine prescribes premium wines, mostly from Spain and France; an all-you-can-wine happy hour is on from 5pm to 7pm every day. fb.com/drwinemania

KARTEL

Sunset sessions in the city take on a beachy vibe here, thanks to the bare-wood finish of the furniture and bamboo bar; the bar's signature Filipino Colada is a blend of Filipino rum, coconut syrup and pineapple juice that makes the setting very relaxing.

INT BAR

The latest haunt along Cubao Expo is stealthily disguised as a photo booth. But behind the curtain is a menu that features some strong and classy cocktails.

BANK BAR

While Bank Bar, accessed through a small utility door inside a 7-Eleven, isn't new, it deserves a special mention for its latest bar chow: grab a bowl of *sisig* (sizzling pork jowl) and rice from Manam along with your drink of choice. fb.com/bankbarmnl

THE CURATOR

Listed in every edition of the Asia's 50 Best Bars list so far (from 2016 to 2018), this speakeasy is worth the drop-in for custom-made, thoughtful cocktails. thecuratorcoffeeandcocktails.com

THIRSTY BARBER

Made by the same guys behind the gents' barbershop Felipe and Sons, this hidden speakeasy is both classy and uninhibited. Just the place to unwind after a cut. thethirstybarber.com



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8 Chilling with friends over icy desserts 9 Top-notch plating at Manam 10 Food sociologist Clinton Palanca 11 Manam gets going at lunch 12 Behind the counter at Manam 13 Yummy *gising-gising* (green beans, pork and coconut milk)

is given to the menu, which tries to balance the heaviness of Filipino comfort food with a few brilliant twists. The signature watermelon *sinigang* with beef short rib uses watermelon to give the sour soup a subtle, sweet finish.

"We try not to have too many things rolled into one," says Abba, "otherwise you lose sight of the DNA of the dish that makes it popular to begin with. I think a twist is really a playful but respectful take on a traditional dish — it shouldn't change the way you eat a dish or change the occasion on which you would eat it. I'm very careful about crossing the line

because you don't want to mess with nostalgic dishes."

But the experimental restaurateurs make you misty-eyed by breaking all the rules. At Toyo Eatery, the superstar spot humbly tucked away in a quiet strip called the Alley at Karrivin along Makati's Chino Roces Avenue, nostalgia has gone for the jugular. Toyo lends casual Filipino cuisine the precision of high culinary art, taking the most nostalgic of childhood memories — a song called "Bahay Kubo", which melodiously details the produce planted around a humble farm hut — and turning it into the inspiration for one of their most iconic dishes. Named after the song, their



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Bahay Kubo is a vegetable salad that almost appears like it's still budding on a bed of soil. An easy way to identify the vegetables that go into its making is to just sing along.

"Bahay Kubo was basically our philosophy on the plate," says head chef Jordy Navarra, who spent time working in restaurants in the UK and Hong Kong before he came home and set his sights on turning Filipino cuisine into serious business. "It was culturally relevant, with Philippine flavors and everyday Philippine ingredients. We felt we stumbled upon the dish that had everything that we wanted to highlight. Looking at the

meal as a whole, though, is something that I feel is important. Dishes are only good when you put them into context — the order of how you eat, where you're eating it, how you eat it."

Endless praise has been heaped on Toyo Eatery since Jordy and his wife, May, opened the restaurant in 2016 for what many refer to as an "elevated take" on Filipino food (more so after receiving the 2018 Miele One to Watch award from Asia's 50 Best Restaurants), yet no one is more reluctant to claim the word "elevation" than the chef behind it. "I prefer 'interpretation' because 'elevation' implies that what you elevated would



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14 Inside Toyo Eatery **15** Wife and husband team May and Jordy Navarra

be inferior. I always think that you're not really improving or fixing the memory or idea you cook from but it's more of... a subjective interpretation, an idea you want to share."

Although the added bite to Manila's dining scene is largely thanks to people's (both the chefs and the customers) willingness to try new things, innovation in our cuisine didn't always mean theatrics and high performance. Historically, innovation in Philippine cooking — the discovery and attempting of new methods, recipes or flavors — was a symptom of place.

"I think that while we celebrate Filipino cuisine, we also have to beware of not seeing the bigger

picture — that the Philippines has always been connected to China, Taiwan, India and the rest of Southeast Asia through trade routes, and later to Europe and the New World," says Clinton. "There's very little in the Philippines that is absolutely unique."

Earlier this year Poison Coffee & Doughnuts, which lives in the same complex as Toyo Eatery and is run by award-winning pastry chef Miko Aspiras and his partner Kristine Lotilla, released their version of a *chamorado* (chocolate rice porridge) and *tuyo* (dried fish) doughnut, with 65% dark chocolate, bits of tuyo and Kellogg's Rice Krispies. Chocolate meets rice meets dried fish meets doughnut. What's "new" about it is hard to pinpoint — chamorado dates



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THIS PAGE (THIRD FROM LEFT)
BNY SHORTS



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“The sheer cultural diversity was bound to produce interesting culinary traditions”

16 Bank Bar at BGC
17 BGC is a shiny new lifestyle center
18 Upping the bread-making game at Panaderya Toyo
19 Freshly baked panaderya goods
20 Sharing plates at Manam

back to Spanish colonial times, when Mexican traders sailing between Manila and Acapulco during the Galleon Trade brought with them a very thick hot chocolate drink called *champurrado*. Eventually, Filipinos thought to add rice to the drink, then eventually balanced out the overwhelming sweetness with salty dried fish.

Colonial history aside, there are also well over a hundred different ethnolinguistic communities in the Philippines spread over 7,641 islands — the sheer cultural diversity was bound to produce interesting culinary

traditions. Resources and recipes vary, so that today, we might find durian in our coffee or salted egg in our *halo-halo* (shaved ice dessert). And depending on where you’re from, it may or may not surprise your taste buds.

“It’s actually a really good thing [that chefs get playful], except that nine out of 10 cases will fail miserably,” adds Clinton. “You’ll get weird things like deconstructed halo-halo, which kind of goes against the point of halo-halo. I’ve had some pretty strange stuff as chefs attempt to innovate and outdo each other —



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Sundowners at Kartel

but Filipino food would stagnate if people didn't try to do new things with it. In fact, there would be no Filipino food, just a bunch of regional food traditions."

The best surprises in food sometimes come with improvisation, particularly when the chef is forced to work with what she or he has available. It was the late, esteemed food critic Doreen Fernandez who said, "*Kinilaw* (raw seafood dish) is like jazz — constantly improvised." But doing that, as Doreen might argue, wasn't always as glamorous as a great chef going off-kilter; it was a function of living in a country where the ingredients available to a cook change from town to town. You can

see all that in classic Filipino dishes like adobo, sinigang or *kare-kare* (stew with a base of peanut sauce) — all also considered "methods" of cooking — which can never really be rooted down to an authentic recipe. Today, in Metro Manila — where we have droves of ingredients, or methods of sourcing them, at our disposal — improvisation is just another part of the game. Can chefs still surprise us with something new? Yes, and Manila is living proof. **S**



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Weird but wonderful

Fantastic, crazy-classic crossovers and where to find them

LENGUA SPRING ROLLS AT HABANERO KITCHEN BAR

It'd be tough to make any claims on "authenticity" here, but the chopped ox tongue with the crunchy wrapper delivers fantastic texture and flavor that needs no justification. fb.com/habanerokitchenbar

CORNED BEEF SINIGANG WITH CHORIZO AT CAFE JUANITA

Salty, sour, delicious. This longstanding dish has become one that the beloved neighborhood café is known and adored for. fb.com/cafejuanitaph

BEER AND CHICHARON ICE CREAM AT CAROUSEL CREAMERY

Even with over a hundred premium flavors on their list, it can hardly get more local than beer and chicharon. fb.com/carouselcreamery

UBE CHURROS AT TITTOS

For love of all things ube, purple pastries can be found all over the metro, but this Spanish take is a pleasant surprise. fb.com/tittosmnl

SIZZLING PAN DE SAL PUDDING AT LOCATORE

Bread pudding whipped up from *pan de sal* (bread roll). This dish also includes salted egg and *dulce de leche* (milk confection), and is served on a sizzling hot plate. locavore.ph